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AN OLD TIME TRAGEDY IN THE STATE PENITENTIARY AT ALTON.*

W. T. Norton, Alton, Ills.

In October, 1857, there was a convict committed to the State penitentiary from Champaign county for the crime of larceny. He was sentenced for seven years. His name was John W. Hall, alias William Lindsay. He was a Tennessean by birth and was 28 years old. He was a man of great strength and wiry frame, and his imprisonment made him insane with rage and hate. After a time he was set to work in the blacksmith shop and, although carefully watched, was able to make himself a short knife out of an old file, which he had managed in some way to procure. This weapon he concealed about his person when he was returned to his cell at night. His cell, like all others, was built of stone. The door was of solid oak, strapped with bars of iron. The prisoner's bed shut down against the door which opened inwards. In the door opening into the corridor was a hole some eight inches square, grated with iron bars. The only other opening into the cell was a narrow slit or window also barred, admitting light and air. A person on the outside, even if mounted on a ladder could not see the prisoner unless the latter so chose. All this was understood by Hall when he concocted a desperate scheme to escape. On the evening of the day when Hall had secured the knife a guard, named C. C. Crabb, was making the rounds of the corridor to see that all was secure for the night. Hall called to him, "Oh Crabb, I

* For the main facts in this article I am indebted to a file of the Alton Courier of 1858; to an article contributed to the Illinois State Register years ago, and to an account of the tragedy written by Judge J. P. Thornton of Alton for the Daily Times of that city.

am sick, please bring me a drink of water." The guard complied with the request and, on unlocking and opening the door, was struck down with an iron bar, which Hall had managed to obtain, and dragged into the cell. Hall then closed the door, took the keys from the guard, locked the door and let down his bed against it. He then bound the guard with strips torn from the bed blanket. The guard had been stunned by the blow and did not recover consciousness for an hour. When Crabb did not return from his rounds at the usual time, search was made for him and the situation discovered. The warden, Col. S. A. Buckmaster, was then hastily summoned to the scene. Hall, meanwhile, armed with the knife, was keeping watch over the prostrate turnkey, and was secure in his cell. He declared that he would kill the guard unless given a full pardon. He also demanded that he be furnished with a revolver, be permitted to walk out of the prison with the guard to a carriage, and that Col. Buckmaster should then drive him as far as he should indicate and then permit him to escape. He further declared that if any attempt was made to take him in his cell he would fall on Crabb and murder him then and there. The situation was tragic. There seemed to be no way of getting at the prisoner that did not render the death of Crabb certain. The citizens of Alton were soon aware of the tragedy and the town was in an uproar. The guard was a well known and respectable citizen and had a family. The news of the situation was sent out over the State and country and attracted absorbed attention from its murderous ingenuity. Communication was kept up with the prisoner and the guard through the slit in the door before which Buckmaster stood guard, pistol in hand, for the greater part of two days (one account says three days), watching for a chance to shoot the convict. But Hall managed to keep himself covered with the body of the guard and his vigilance never relaxed. Hall said he had been trying to get the warden, instead of the guard, but had been compelled

to take smaller game; whereupon Buckmaster offered to take the place of Crabb if the latter might be released. Hall, however, declined to exchange his captive although Buckmaster offered to go into the cell naked. It was useless to try and poison the convict for the guard was compelled to eat of the same food, and the little window did not afford a view of either. When this desperate situation was made known to Gov. Bissell at Springfield, he at once sent a pardon to Col. Buckmaster, to be used at his discretion, but the warden decided not to avail himself of it except at the last extremity. No pains were spared to catch the convict off his guard, but he seemed to feel neither fatigue nor fear. When every other expedient failed the warden decided to force the door, and in doing this the convict's heel was exposed, and a bullet pierced it. This unnerved him and he carelessly brought his head into view and a ball from the pistol entered it. But before this he had cruelly wounded Crabb with repeated stabs. As Hall fell the guards rushed in and dragged Crabb out. The convict proved to be mortally wounded and died two days later in the prison hospital in great agony. He was attended by Dr. Hez. Williams, then prison surgeon. The warden's course was approved and sanctioned by the superintendent of the prison, F. S. Rutherford. Crabb, although frightfully injured, eventually recovered and held his place in the penitentiary after its removal to Joliet. The tragedy was long remembered in Alton and throughout the State.

The inquest held on the body of Hall was notable for the personnel of the jury. It was composed of twelve of the foremost citizens of Alton, viz.: Levi Davis, an eminent jurist, foreman; Samuel Wade, then serving his fourth term as Mayor; George T. and Joseph Brown, both former Mayors; William Post, who was twice Mayor; E. Marsh, bank president; Nathaniel Hanson, Manufacturer; J. R. Stanford, capitalist; Samuel Pitts,

host of Franklin House; A. S. Barry, druggist; William H. Turner, merchant; Wm. A. Platt, mechanic.

The inquest was held by William G. Pinckard, J. P., acting coroner, on the 13th of March, 1858. The jury found that Hall came to his death, when in a state of revolt, from a pistol shot wound inflicted by S. A. Buckmaster, the warden, to save the life of the guard, C. C. Crabb, the shooting taking place on the 10th of March and Hall dying on the 11th. The jury exonerated Buckmaster from all blame, finding him fully and entirely justified in his action.

Col. Buckmaster was one of the best known of the Democratic leaders of the State. He was mayor of Alton once before and once after the tragedy; served several terms in both houses of the Legislature; was member of the constitutional convention of 1862, and twice a candidate for Governor before the conventions of his party.